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SUBJECT: ITALIAN FM: NO MORE ON MILITARY SIDE IN AFGHANISTAN

ROME 00000163 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald P. Spogli, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) A/S Fried urged FM D'Alema to bring to the NATO ministerial on Afghanistan ideas for an enhanced commitment, including on caveats, to the multinational effort there. D'Alema responded flatly that Italy could not do more on the military side, although it would confirm its commitment. When Fried pressed, D'Alema remained carefully noncommittal, but did finally agree to speak to PM Prodi to see what more might be done, including on the political level. The FM said he expected fighting to spread to Kabul and the West from the south in coming months, and felt Italy must be prepared to take casualties. D'Alema also argued the need for a US-EU strategy vis-a-vis Iran and Syria, and said he wished to discuss this with the Secretary. When Fried urged action on Bank Sepah, D'Alema said it was important to respect UN resolutions on the Iran nuclear issue, but not more. He saw worrying signs on the security front in Lebanon, including that al-Qaeda elements may be preparing terrorist attacks against UNIFIL forces. A national agreement was essential to stabilize the country, and two points were non-negotiable: support for PM Siniora, and the international tribunal. As in Lebanon, the Palestinians need a national accord, and D'Alema didn't see how there could be either elections or a government without some kind of agreement between Fatah and Hamas. We need to support Abu Mazen, but it was not wise to encourage him in confronting Hamas, assessed D'Alema. Fried agreed that we need to support Abu Mazen, but we also have to support the Quartet principles and be patient. End Summary.

Afghanistan

¶2. (U) A/S Fried, accompanied by Amb and Pol M/C, met January 12 with FM Massimo D'Alema at his MFA office. Also attending were the FM's chief of staff, Fernando Nelli Feroce, as well as senior adviser Marta Dassu, and an MFA notetaker.

¶3. (C) Fried stressed to D'Alema the importance of the upcoming NATO ministerial on Afghanistan. We need to be ready with a comprehensive strategy before the expected Taliban offensive this spring. That means politics/governance, economy, counter-narcotics, Pakistan

border, and security. The US won't pull its troops from Afghanistan for Iraq. But need to build on Riga; and our view on the need to reduce or eliminate caveats has not changed; we all must do more, across the board. The Embassy will be coming to the GOI in next few days with ideas and hopes Italy can pitch in.

¶4. (C) D'Alema responded flatly that Italy could not do more militarily. Italy wants to confirm its presence, but even that will be tough, given public opinion and political opposition in governing majority. The situation is changing, there are signs of increased terrorist activity and signs that fighting could spread next spring beyond the south, to Kabul and the West (where Italy is operating). The GOI has to be ready for casualties in the coming months. It will confirm its commitment. But 2,000 people in Afghanistan is a lot for Italy. Before the end of January funding will be renewed for 12 months, as opposed to previous six-month renewals.

¶5. (C) As for the political commitment, D'Alema claimed he didn't know what else was possible. The GOI had called for an international conference, but the Afghan government did not want it. D'Alema thought a London II event could be a good idea, but said it would depend on President Karzai and the USG. Karzai will travel to Rome in mid-February when Italy is hosting a rule of law conference on Afghanistan. What was needed was greater commitment by the international community, not just NATO, assessed D'Alema. Neighboring countries -- and not only Pakistan -- have an interest. The Chinese, who have 93 km common border with Afghanistan, are concerned about Islamist groups and terror activity in their own territory, and do not want an Islamist regime in their neighborhood. They could support international efforts, it doesn't need to be NATO-only.

ROME 00000163 002.4 OF 003

¶6. (C) Fried agreed we need to be ready for a military challenge from the Taliban in Kabul and the West, as well as the south. He also agreed on the need for broader cooperation beyond NATO and the need to present the effort in Afghanistan to our peoples as more than a purely military effort. But he hoped D'Alema's final position, when confronted with a great challenge, would not be to claim it cannot do more and pointed out that "the prescription doesn't fit the analysis." When D'Alema replied, "but we can't," Fried noted that PM Prodi had told him the previous day that he would consider the request (septel) and explained that he was merely asking that the GOI consider, before the NATO ministerial, what more it might do. If Italian forces were attacked in West, they would expect, and deserve, the support of their NATO allies. They wouldn't like it if the Canadians told them, while Italian forces were under attack, that Canadians couldn't do more. Fried said the USG realizes the difficulty some governments have in eliminating caveats, and suggested that perhaps Italy will have other assets to offer; in any event, for Italy to claim that it can't do more is a bad message. Because more international engagement on the civil side is also needed, continued Fried, it is important to think about possible contributions there as well.

¶7. (C) D'Alema said the message was that Italy would confirm its commitment. He would talk to Prodi and see what, if anything else could be done, including on the political level.

Iran

¶8. (C) D'Alema said he didn't understand what the President meant when he said the USG was going to confront Iran and Syria because they support our enemies in the region. Very tough, but what does it mean? What is the strategy? The FM said he wanted to discuss the issue with the Secretary. He claimed he had been very cautious, noting that he had not

gone to Damascus, even though the German and Spanish foreign ministers had gone. They had wanted him to go but he hadn't. However, we need a strategy, continued D'Alema. Iran is an important country. Political engagement is needed. It is important because it will be difficult to have stability in Iraq without Iranian support. Iran also has considerable influence in the Herat area of Afghanistan.

¶9. (C) Fried said we appreciated the fact that D'Alema had not gone to Damascus. The USG agrees on the need to engage Iranian civil society; our strategy should include outreach to them. And we need politics, but we need to be tough as well, such as by doing more on the issue of the Iranian bank, Bank Sepah. D'Alema replied that the problem is that the nuclear issue is the one thing that unites Iranian society. By contrast, the Iranians don't like to see TV coverage of their money going to Hizballah in Lebanon, because they think it's better spent at home. We need to respect the UNSCRs, but not do more than that, D'Alema said. We need to discuss this thoroughly; there is no current US-EU strategy. Fried said MFA political director Terzi had been invited to Washington. We want to talk about both Iran and Kosovo, and need to do more on Iran politically and financially.

Lebanon/Palestinians

¶10. (C) D'Alema said he had met recently with both Lebanese PM Siniora and parliament speaker Berri. A national agreement was needed in Lebanon. There are two non-negotiable points: 1) support for Siniora; and 2) the international tribunal. We need to commit to Siniora as a serious partner. Siniora and Berri both want the tribunal issue taken out of their hands and for the UNSC to decide it. But in end if there is no national agreement of some kind, it will be very difficult to stabilize Lebanon.

¶11. (S/NF) The FM said there have been worrying signs on security. Al-Qaeda elements are present in the Palestinian camps and there are signs they may be preparing terrorist attacks on UNIFIL. There have been no problems with Hizballah yet, but something new is starting. Israel and Mossad had been exerting pressure for Italy to help identify Hizballah leaders. This was not possible (given Italy's position as part of the UN force) and the Italian services had declined. Immediately afterward, disinformation appeared

ROME 00000163 003.2 OF 003

in some Arab media outlets to the effect that the Italian services were cooperating with Israel. This, in turn, drew a negative reaction from the other side, including some threats. D'Alema said he was more and more concerned about the security situation in the south. It has to be managed carefully. If Israel strikes, it will be very difficult to control the situation. So Lebanon, for him, remains a key problem -- 1) Italy has 3,000 troops there; 2) it has the UNIFIL command; and 3) Hizballah remains the main threat, because it is not likely that either the Palestinians in Lebanon or Syria will attack Israel.

¶12. (C) On the Palestinian Authority, he didn't understand how there could be elections or even a government without some kind of agreement with Hamas. It was not wise to encourage Abu Mazen in confronting Hamas. Israel wants a partner for peace, but it is hard to envision a workable settlement without Hamas. While they're weakened, they are still deeply rooted in Palestinian society. Italian reports say the leaders of Hamas live in the camps with the people; Fatah leaders live in villas with bodyguards. It is by no means sure, whatever Hamas' mistakes, that Hamas will necessarily lose elections, including those for President. The idea that they might actually win can hardly be a welcome prospect. D'Alema said he knows that the Secretary advocates splitting moderates and extremists, but he is doubtful. He believes it is possible to get an agreement; on January 10, Hamas leader Khalid Mishaal had acknowledged in an interview

that Israel is a reality. Abu Mazen is politically stronger than in past, but we need to reinforce him militarily, including with ammunition. He could use that strength to get a good agreement with Hamas.

¶13. (C) Fried responded that we do indeed need to support Abu Mazen, but we also need to be consistent with the Quartet principles and be patient. Noting that the Secretary was about to go to the Middle East, he suggested D'Alema call her and discuss his views.

Somalia

¶14. (C) Fried made a point of raising Somalia, because D'Alema had publicly criticized "unilateral" nature of the US strike in southern Somalia, saying it risked further destabilization. The A/S said there had been a target of opportunity. We took it, and we were not sorry. We want African Union forces in Somalia, the Ethiopians out, and a political process. In the attack we had targeted al-Qaeda, including one person who had planned bombings that killed hundreds of Africans. Moreover, the attack was supported by the closest thing that there is to legitimate authority in the country.

Comment

¶15. (C) There was not a lot of good news in this meeting. D'Alema was even more hard-over than PM Prodi (septel) on not doing more than Italy already is doing on the military side in Afghanistan. Nevertheless, Fried pressed the issue hard, and in the end the FM agreed to discuss with the PM what, if anything could be done. Similarly, D'Alema's minimalist approach to the Iran nuclear resolutions does not bode well for our continuing efforts to encourage greater Italian activism in applying financial pressure on Iran. End Comment.

¶16. (U) This cable was cleared by A/S Fried.

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